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The screen door

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THE SCREEN DOOR

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Master of Arts

by

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ABSTRACT

THE SCREEN DOOR

by Cathie B. Milner

This Creative Writing thesis consists of a statement of aesthetic theory and series of poems. It develops the paradoxical natures of weight and non-weight, dark and light, duty and freedom. It addresses the interpersonal relationships between lovers and between parents and children; as well as relationships between genres (writing and painting), places (New Orleans, the Mississippi Gulf Coast, the Bay Area), and religion (Christianity and its absence). Filtering sense impressions through memory, the *screen door* opens onto the front porch (community) and the back porch (the private life).

DEDICATION

To my family: my parents, Paul and Mary Catherine Bennett, who took me to the library and to England; and to my children, Paul and Bess, who made me laugh; To my first English professor, Dr. Maria H. Butler, who touched the fire to the lamp.

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"Artists have always been drawn to the wild, wide elements they cannot control or understand--the sea, mountains, fire. To be an artist means to approach the light, and that means to let go our control, to allow our whole selves to be placed with absolute faith in that which is greater than we are. The novel we sit down to write, and the one we end up writing may be very different, just as the Jesus we grasp and the Jesus who grasps us may also differ."

--Madelaine L'Engle

The Screen Door

In *The Unbearable Lightness of Being*, Milan Kundera compares the concepts of darkness and lightness, cold and warmth, weight and non-weight. Heaviness , thought perhaps to be a negative, can in actuality be a preferred state of being, without which man floats in an endless air of existential freedom.

> The heaviest of burdens crushes us, we sink beneath it, it pins us to the ground. But in love poetry of every age, the woman longs to be weighed down by the man's body. The heaviest of burdens is therefore simultaneously an image of life's most intense fulfillment. The heavier the burden, the closer our lives come to the earth, the more real and truthful they become.
>
> Conversely, the absolute absence of a burden causes man to be lighter than air, to soar into the heights, take leave of the earth and his earthly being, and become only half real, his movements as free as they are insignificant. (5)

Does not indeed the flight *away from* possession/protection paradoxically carry within its makeup the essence of the return *home to* possession/protection--or at least to earth? Does not the imaginative mind hold the ability to stand still or the waiting body have the wings to soar? To write of places where one has experienced *moments* of interaction which represent *years* of relationship is to relive what is past, what is lost--to recapture and remake through our memory lens what happened or what we desired had happened, colored with vibrant hues or dramatic *chiaroscuro*, sifted through mesh as sounds and smells and sights filter through a *screen door.* So do we remain tied to the earth.

The screen door is the paradox; the transition; the veil between interiority and the public self; a mesh (to enmesh?) to keep out blood-sucking mosquitoes, through which one can *see* shrimp trawlers' lights moving slowly through the

channel, *smell* pavements steaming after a sudden August thundershower, *hear* the sound of familiar footsteps coming down a corridor, *feel* the heavy salt air pushed down by a ceiling fan. It is not a solid door shutting out the past, memory. The screen door is the metal net that sifts the wheat from the chaff; it opens onto the *front porch* (community, friends, a public place) and to the *back porch* (solitude, the lovers, the personal life). For eyes willing to penetrate the veil, art can enlighten, illuminate, scintillate, throw light on; it can shade, silhouette, eclipse, obscure, dim--but ultimately reveal--the homecoming, the return to earth. Then we come face to face with truth, or the keeper of truth--the veil is lifted; we look not at the grid of the screen, but beyond its containment to the honeysuckle.

Although the literary influences which have helped to shape my own writing are extensive, the most beneficial in formulating my aesthetic theory are an early poem by Thom Gunn, Robert Penn Warren's late poetry, James Dickey's *Poems 1957-1967*, Tennessee Williams' plays, Faulkner's canon, and Kundera's *The Unbearable Lightness of Being*. And, since I was a painter before I was a poet, the work of Matisse, Vuillard, and Bonnard, painters of color and detail and light, have made immense contributions to both areas of my work, one fed by the other.

On a trip with my parents in the early 60's, I visited Stratford and the home of Shakespeare's son-in-law. Of one exhibit I remember nothing but a framed poem by Thom Gunn, "Tamer and Hawk," which I hastily copied in a dime store notebook, soon memorized, and often recited in my mind--as we do with favorite lines of poems or song lyrics. This early Gunn poem, composed when he lived in London, was published in 1954 in a small volume of twenty-

four poems entitled *Fighting Terms*. Although the poem has always illuminated for me the interdependency--bordering on obsession--of the romantic relationship, not until I began to formulate my ideas for this statement did I realize that this small poem signifies for me other interpersonal relationships, especially those between parents and children. The poem illuminates as well relationships between genres (writing and painting), places (New Orleans, the Mississippi Gulf Coast, the Bay Area), and religion (Christianity or its absence). Gunn writes:

> I thought I was so tough,
> But gentled at your hands
> . . .
> I am no longer free:
> You seeled me with your love,
> I am blind to other birds--
> The habit of your words
> Has hooded me.
>
> As formerly, I wheel
> I hover and I twist,
> But only want the feel
> In my possessive thought,
> Of catcher and of caught
> Upon your wrist.
>
> You but half-civilize,
> Taming me in this way.
> Through having only eyes
> For you I fear to lose,
> I lose to keep . . . (33)

Writing in the hawk's persona, the Gunn speaker describes the body's response to touch, the emotion of love. "Gentled," to calm or tame or restrain with kindness, evokes a theme familiar to so much Southern literature, in which gentlemen of chivalric code, with its associations of courtesy, honor, loyalty, nobility, enter (often confining) relationships with women and children. The harsh imagery of *seel*--stitching a hawk's eyelids closed--is reminiscent of *The Song of Songs:*

> for love is strong as death,
> jealousy is cruel as the grave.
> Its flashes are flashes of fire,
> a most vehement flame. (821)

In similar fashion, the artist is "seeled" by the laws of art. The ability of the "habit of . . . words" to *hood* is the most singular expression that I know of the nature of language to seduce, to entrap, to mystify, to engage, to captivate--and to capture--those of us who revere language. Within flight and freedom lies the enchainment of duty (to parents) or commitment (to children) or sacrifice (to God's will). To "wheel . . . hover and . . . twist" conveys the movement of flight *away from* and *return to* the "catcher and of caught." That the tamer can only "half-civilize" suggests the hawk's paradoxical desire to be tame *and* wild. "I fear to lose, / I lose to keep" suggests the Christian promises of *joy*, the unsought reward for sacrifice; and *grace*, the unmerited gift from God.

George Herbert's "The Collar" also represents the unresolved struggle between the individual will and God's will: "My lines and life are free, free as the road," but

> . . . as I raved and grew more fierce and wild
> At every word,
> Methought I heard one calling, *Child!*

And I replied, *My Lord.* (138-9)

Herbert perceives our tie to God to be a "pulley": not only are we bound to God by his gifts of "strength . . . then beauty . . . then wisdom, honor, pleasure"; but also by the blessing which He withholds--"rest." He explains:

> "For if I should," said he,
> "Bestow this jewel also on my creature,
> He would adore my gifts instead of me,
> And rest in Nature, not the God of Nature;
> So both would losers be." ("The Pulley," 139)

Thus the weight of our desire for rest, for peace, pulls us home.

In "The Windhover: To Christ our Lord," Gerard Manley Hopkins portrays this paradoxical nature of Christianity:

> . . . My heart in hiding
> Stirred for a bird,--the achieve of, the mastery of the thing!
>
> Brute beauty and valour and act, oh, air, pride, plume, here
> Buckle! AND the fire that breaks from thee then, a billion
> Times told lovelier, more dangerous, O my chevalier! (503)

The speaker desires "mastery" of the bird which itself has "mastery"; and the "fire that breaks" is like lightning--the same blaze which destroys the forest releases the new seed from its pod.

Artist and naturalist John James Audubon killed thousands of birds in order to paint them. In his narrative poem *Audubon: A Vision,* Robert Penn Warren explores both the inability of the artist and poet to recapture life and beauty and joy, and this desire (compulsion?) of the artist to relive the vision through the ecstatic process of creation--painting birds, writing about birds. Penn Warren writes:

[Audubon] walked in the world. Knew the lust of the eye.

Wrote: "Ever since a Boy I have had an astonishing desire
to see Much of the World and particularly to acquire
a true knowledge of the Birds of North America."

. . . . .

Their footless dance
Is of the beautiful liability of their nature.

. . . . .

He slew them at surprising distances, with his gun.
Over a body held in his hand, his head was bowed low,
But not in grief.
He put them where they are, and there we see them:
In our imagination.

What is love?

One name for it is knowledge. (388-91)

Penn Warren and Audubon knew the *heaviness* of art--its angel/devil nature: the compulsion which pulls the poet back to his writing; the burden of depression which precedes new paintings; the weight of dreams and waking dreams--of unresolved words and lines and shapes. ("'Wrote" . . . in my sleep I continually dream of birds.'") But from this burden, this heaviness, comes the "intense fulfillment" of creation. What we are able to convey is only an essence, however--our attempt to recreate what we know or think we know, filtered as through memory or a veil or a mist, as through a mesh, as through a *screen door.*

Southern intensity is manifest in Robert Penn Warren's poetry. His lush imagery in the highly alliterative and metaphoric poem "The Leaf" symbolizes the temporal nature of the world's summer, our summer:

The world is fruitful. In this heat

The plum, black yet bough-bound, bursts, and the gold ooze is,
Of bees, joy, the gold ooze has striven
Outward, it wants again to be of
The goldness of air and--blessedly--innocent. The grape
Weakens at the juncture of the stem. The world

Is fruitful, and I, too . . . . (374)

The slow-moving quality of the single-stressed words in the second line above recreates the heaviness of the long days of late summer in the South, the heat broken only by the black clouds and radiant lightning of a thunderstorm. The "gold ooze . . . wants again to be . . . innocent"--but it returns to earth.

In order to recreate a vision, James Dickey's speaker, in "Approaching Prayer," assumes the physical weight of a slain animal and the emotional heaviness of a "ravelled" sweater (*Poems*, 163-8). Kneeling, he puts on a hog's head, and exchanges places with both his dead father and a boar killed by the father and son. The speaker attempts to retie the threads of memory, to "go / Beyond what there is in the room, // But it must come straight down. / Lord, it is time . . . "

To circle through my father's empty house
Looking for things to put on
Or to strip myself of
So that I can fall to my knees
And produce a word I can't say
Until all my reason is slain.

Ritualistically, the son slips on "the gray sweater" his "father wore in the cold"--its "snapped threads" a macabre reminder of "gray body hair" continuing to grow inside the grave. The "things" of which he desires to "strip" himself are not material, but abstract: logic, order, control, "reason"; and in this divestment

he attempts to access the mysterious realm of the dream, and to surrender to an image of life rising from death, light from dark: "THE LION'S SKULL PULSING WITH HONEY." "Until all my reason is slain" summarizes a theme that drives Dickey's poetry--the embrace of the instinctual, the primitive; the prophetic warning that man's relationship with the mechanistic is off-balance, that the weight of mental preoccupations which increasingly supplant the physical and spiritual are not "fulfilling," but deadening.

To "slay reason" is an aspect of drama--Coleridge's "willing suspension of disbelief." Reader and audience are invited to *participate* in a silent dialogue with the piece, a circularity of response involving language and movement and light and sound. Tennessee Williams' plays, with their veiled lights and shadowed illusions, paper lanterns and steamy jungles, serve to *strip* man of his magnificence and frailties (the latter perhaps being a necessary component of the former). Williams' metaphors, as familiar as brown stains on a white gardenia, characteristically illuminate the *sacred and profane* (New Orleans embraces both Roman Catholicism *and* Voodoo). In *The Streetcar Named Desire,* Blanche dims a hanging light with her scarf and masks her face with heavy makeup; in *The Rose Tattoo,* Serafina closes shutters and enshrines her dead husband's ashes; Amanda, in *The Glass Menagerie,* "spins her web" around her daughter and costumes herself in the dusty dresses of her youth. Williams does not burden his characters with moral judgment, however, but views them with compassion. In his essay "Tennessee Williams: Desire and Impotence in New Orleans," Ted R. Spivey suggests that Amanda's son Tom "does not leave his mother with disgust or horror or rage but with pain and love." He explains:

> The spider at the center of the family web then is not the mother but rather her crippling hunger, a hunger so uncontrollable it has caused her to spin a crippling psychic web around her daughter Laura. Tom knows he must leave before it cripples him too. (126)

Williams' characters come face to face with truth--or they themselves are the keepers of truth--portraying what Faulkner describes as "the human heart in conflict with itself." To attempt to name characters with an abstraction such as compassion, however, incurs suspicion, traditionally, among Southerners, who prefer the concrete, the detailed, the individual. *To name* is to own, to possess, to contain, to limit--*to stereotype*. The South, as we know it through its literature, is composed of people, not stereotypes.

For Kundera, *compassion* is "the maximal capacity of affective imagination, the art of emotional telepathy." He differentiates between two etymologies for the concept of compassion:

> All languages that derive from Latin form the word "compassion" by combining the prefix meaning "with" (*com-*) and the root meaning "suffering" (Late Latin, *passio*). . . . [W]e cannot look on coolly as others suffer; or, we sympathize with those who suffer. [But in] other languages--Czech, Polish, German, and Swedish, for instance, [the root] means "feeling" [not "pity" or "suffering"]. . . . The secret strength of its etymology floods the word with another light and gives it a broader meaning: to have compassion (co-feeling) means not only to be able to live with the other's misfortune but also to feel with him any emotion--joy, anxiety, happiness, pain. . . . In the hierarchy of sentiment, then it is supreme. (19-20)

This empathetic characteristic of relationship, this *participatory quality of art* is, of course, intrinsic to poetry and to other writing as well. Eric Pankey, in his essay "Silences, Forgeries, and Disappearing Acts: Variations on the Lyrical Movement," suggests that in poetry "what is left unsaid, what is unsayable, is

where the reader somehow recognizes and knows the complete truth of the poem." He suggests:

> . . . It is the language's imperfections that allow the not-yet-intelligible to be glimpsed. Those imperfections often show themselves on the surface of the poem as gaps, as *O* or *Ah!*, as a dash, as a white space, as syntactical ambiguity, as an absence of conjunction, or other sorts of rhetorical connective tissue. (17-9)

Thus, Hopkins pulls us into "The Windhover" at the line break ". . . air, pride, plume, here . . ."--catching us at the peak of the spiral, at the turning point of the poem--before "Buckle!" and "AND . . . "--Pankey's "*Ah!*"

Central to my work is what Hugh Holman calls the "southern riddle": a "union of opposites, a condition of instability, a paradox." Holman further defines this (very familiar) paradox:

> Calm grace and raw hatred. Polished manners and violence. An intense individualism and intense group pressures toward conformity. A reverence to the point of idolatry of self-determining action. . . . (Qtd. in Prenshaw, 5-6)

Mississippi writer Willie Morris explains this ambiguity:

> [I]n the blood of me I know [the South's] single most enduring quality has been the burden of its memory, its past of anguish and despair and cruelty but also of rare courage and honor and sacrifice; from its common sense of soil sprang the disposition in the soul of it for the most intense strivings, triumphs, and defeats, for imagination and exuberance and playfulness. (*Southern Album*)

(Morris' style is reflective of Faulkner's, as is that of many Mississippians--"the Faulkner burden"? Many Southern writers instinctively emulate Faulkner's dreamlike stream-of-consciousness; his polysyndetonic use of *and* as connective; his density of meaning inherent in a single word; his ability to inhabit the mind

of each character. Also, however, his weighty discourse is imitative of sometimes unbelievably protracted and repetitious storytelling among Southerners--our tendency to repeat each statement *three* times.)

What then is this relationship of paradox to poetry? Peggy Prenshaw, in her essay "The Paradoxical Southern World of Tennessee Williams," suggests that paradox is "a language of tension and ambiguity that evokes the complexity of experience in a concrete image," stating succinctly what we already know: that a Southern writer "characteristically values the concrete, particular and anecdotal over the abstract, general and philosophical" (7). Let me reiterate here the distrust of containment, of *being owned/possessed* with the reverse side of the same pink aluminum Mardi Gras doubloon: the obsessive desire *to own* (but also *to protect from harm*), *to possess*--Gunn's "Of catcher and of caught": to remind you of this heat-driven, guilt-ridden sexuality trying to survive schizophrenically in an environment filtered through the *screen door* of "what will people think?": where nice girls don't and nice boys do; where a family's reputation rests upon Caddy's drawers.

The relationship between painting and poetry, however, is not paradoxical, but clearly defined. A painter's eye is always registering light, rhythm, and color. *Light* is intriguing because of its inconstancy, its mood-evoking intensities, high and low. The slant of light differs in the South and in the Bay Area--also the *color* of light. Light seems more precious in San Francisco, for example, than on the Mississippi Gulf Coast, because of its relative thinness, its veiled quality owing to a *screen door* of fog--or as James Dickey might suggest, "fretted cloud-cloth" (*Puella*, 31)--allowing pieces of sky to pierce through mist

like music from guitar strings. Southern light, on the other hand, is robust, energizing, and, frankly, sometimes quite destructive in its fierce insistence. At times, therefore, it is essential to separate oneself with shade, shadow.

This thin light is a silvery-yellow: poems I write now seem to be sensitive to a this pale, perhaps less emotional, environment. The ideal might be, of course, to balance the two intensities of light, the warm and the cool, manipulating by memory, and also establishing a tension between lush description and then a paring down of descriptive detail. Does one aesthetic negate the other? I think not, anymore than the fallow time of winter cancels out the "gold ooze" of summer.

Every experienced painter knows that shadows are not black. They are, rather, rich layerings of purples, blues, browns--peopled with many shades, serving as foils for their complementary colors. A black space is a dead space--ask any scene painter or costume designer--holding no light. I believe that in a poem as well, we must paint for the reader a place--a neighborhood, a studio, a cottage, a room, a porch--where people can do what people do. In my poems these details may seem literal--and many are--but most are metaphoric as well, carrying in their names many meanings that I am aware of, and even more which the reader may bring to the poem--that participatory quality of art I seek.

My choice of a color or detail is seldom arbitrary. I like to play with a room in my mind--the way traditional women liked to rearrange furniture, hang curtains, plant a garden. In his small canvases the very feminine Vuillard recreates his dining room in Paris--the workroom where his mother and her helpers sewed corsets for her dressmaking business. His lamplit paintings are imbued with pattern--florals, geometrics, paisleys--covering draperies, chairs,

tablecloths, women's dresses. His vision is interior, intimate. What Proust wrote about Chardin characterizes Vuillard as well:

> The pleasure you get from his painting of a room where a woman sits sewing . . . is the pleasure--seized on the wind, redeemed from the transient, ascertained, pondered, perpetuated--that he got from the sight of a room where a woman sat sewing. . . . You already experienced it subconsciously, this pleasure one gets from everyday scenes and inanimate objects, otherwise it would not have arisen in your heart when Chardin summoned it in his ringing, commanding accents. (*Vuillard*, 74)

Bonnard also painted highly-patterned interiors, but his compositions are flooded with outside light streaming in from windows and doors--sometimes warm golden light, other times that silvery, violet-tinted light. For thirty years he painted Marthe (his companion and model) in the bathtub, her unchanging body discerned through the lens of his memory. In his essay, "'The Adventures of the Optic Nerve'" (the title drawn from a note in Bonnard's diary), Jean Clair describes the "inner time" of the painter:

> . . . to capture time means to keep it at a distance, avoiding direct contact with the moment. . . . He said he could only translate the feeling he had on seeing his subject by distancing himself from it and then, as it were, recomposing it from memory. . . . Then, when the distillation of memory had retained only its finest and most lasting qualities, its light and its odor, it would shine again with all its brightness in the purer air of his memory, giving him the same feeling of bliss as came to Proust who, . . . on hearing the sound of a spoon on a plate, could once again conjure up a vision of a green and sweet-scented grove springing up around him. (30-1)

As a writer lays down words on the page, so did Bonnard work his paints, flattening the space with blocks of light, separating planes with doorjambs, mirrors, window frames--similar in manner to a poet's separating stanzas: the one moving the eye in and around the painting's surface by repetition of color,

light and shadow; the other guiding his reader through the poem with an *echo* of repeated sounds, establishing tension with paradoxical concepts, creating mystery with unanswered questions (negative space?), manipulating time. This rhythm, possessing the physicality of music, of dance, illuminates what we choose to be dominant, to be noticed, remembered. We may believe, however, that we have *consciously* chosen our echoes; but what is precious--or necessary--to our soul, we lay down on the page or the canvas in a state of heightened sensibility, our fingers shafts of light.

The tradition is old: the artist works with the building blocks of childhood, of memory. Far back in our literary history, St. Augustine, in his *Confessions,* described the relationship of weight to love:

> A body tends by its weight towards the place proper to it--weight does not necessarily tend towards the lowest place but towards its proper place. Fire tends upwards, stone downwards. By their weight they are moved and seek their proper place. Oil poured over water is borne on the surface of the water, water poured over oil sinks below the oil: it is by their weight that they are moved and seek their proper place. Things out of their place are in motion: they come to their place and are at rest. My love is my weight: wherever I go my love is what brings me there. (72)

Much of what we love changes, as light shifts with seasons or place. Our shadows are not black, but peopled with what we may try to forget, containing pieces of ourselves, serving to illuminate who we are. Many of the porches where we have been--in a swing or a rocking chair or on the steps--are gone, and so we have only *moments,* snapshots, of times when lamplight streamed out from the kitchen or bedroom or hall, laying blocks of warm light on green or gray painted floorboards or casting our shadows out onto the dark lawn. We were

able then to be a part of our neighborhood and have our privacy too, to be an audience for stories told and retold by our families. The *screen door* is not a wooden door: we peer through the mesh because we long to remember what was, and we choose to embrace what comes. The screen door that we open does not remain open nor does it slam shut; it closes gently because of the spring joining the house and the door, the containment and the means of flight: "O Love that wilt not let me go" (*Hymnal*, 234). Where was your screen door?

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The Screen Door

The last door to be closed was the screen door, the one from my bedroom out to the back porch where I sat every morning when the weather was nice drinking my first cup of coffee thinking about Art and Men, with the huge oak tree over in the corner of the yard so old the limbs lay on the ground, and honeysuckle spread all over the rusty fence that ran alongside of my cottage (the wood floors painted green, cool under my bare feet in the summer, and lace curtains catching the breeze from the ceiling fan at night), and next to the steps a small spade I picked out myself, to turn the dirt in the flower beds out front full of purple and fuchsia petunias, and on the front porch sprawling red geraniums in big clay pots set here and there on the steps, my gift to the street.

It was easy then to go out and pick honeysuckle and bring it into the house and put it in the tall vase glazed gray with pale blue washes, the potter's mark a zigzag sketched on the front, honeysuckle spilling up and over the soft pink mantelpiece and leaving a delicate scent in the bedroom, one that reminds me of the woods where I played when I was girl pulling the stamen of the flowers growing wild to taste the clear drop of honey on my tongue.

On the back porch of my cottage those years the coffee was thick and heavy and always a little bitter, but I filled my cup halfway up with warm milk and sipped slowly.

Skating to Utopia

A screen door slams at the end of the street.
The boys are whistling in the treehouse.
On the neutral ground, my sister
is knotting crowns of clover.
I am skating, summer races
past my cotton shirt.

The fast silver of my wheels
blazes down the straight stretch of the sidewalk
on the block between Rosedale and Utopia.
These roller skates clamped to my shoes speed
down the stretch of sidewalk
roughened by the texture of pebbles.

Almost to Utopia, slick pavement
like glass vanishes under my feet.
On this corner the cement was mixed with fine sand
and smoothed by the hands of a master.
When I lean out to the right, my shorts touch my ankles:
I am taking the curve on one skate.

Utopia Drive: 1950

Sean McGarry's frying frogs again
and melting plastic toys he stole
from the neighborhood boys,
during *Ramar of the Jungle.*
He's the most repulsive boy
I've ever known; I can't take
my eyes off of him.

Ronald Merlin's walking on cars
again and stealing dimes and quarters
from his grandmother's pickle jar,
buying *Horror Tales from the Crypt.*
He's got more funny books than anyone
I know; I can't stay away from him.

Dermarius Frederick's playing doctor again
and giving me the facts. She points to breasts
of Africans, while looking at *National Geographic.*
She knows how babies are made--
her parents showed her; I can't stop
listening to her.

I'm taking away my sister's friends
again and stealing her bicycle, riding
to the *Garden of Memories* to sneak around
the mausoleum and lie on graves;
picking Sunday flowers from the vases;
I can't stop crying.

The Washcloth

The small blue-and-white striped washcloth that I washed and folded Tuesday is the same size as the washcloths Grandma Riddle gave me that day, standing in the downstairs apartment she was remodeling (in her boarding house the largest apartment faced south and I saw her there many times and in the back yard wielding her hammer and saw, her wash dress covered with dried paint): she worked a little at a time laying in a new floor instead of spattering the old scuffed linoleum with leftover paints like she did in her old kitchen (my sister and I used to laugh at her food in the summer when we came over to Biloxi from New Orleans--her hamburgers full of bread soaked in buttermilk and slimy okra cooked down in bacon grease--calling her old-fashioned at night in whichever room was vacant and not rented out to the Air Force boys, under the bed maybe *True Romance* or even better Mickey Spillane).

I remember the red and pink four-o-clocks that grew high and wild in her front yard instead of grass and how the sand felt in the bottom of her bathtub and how long her coarse gray hair was, if we were there on the day she took it down and washed it, and how she braided her hair that used to be auburn and wrapped the end of each long braid with a single hair. I remember the pale blue maternity dress I had on that day I was nineteen when she walked over to her good wardrobe and gave me for the new baby three small washcloths blue, yellow, and pink she had saved from boxes of soap powder, the sun streaming in off the Gulf. And I remember the sound of my Mother's voice a year later when Grandma died and how she told me that hidden in the back of her mother's refrigerator in a pickle jar was a thousand dollars wrapped in tin foil to pay for her funeral.

Biscuits

I was beginning to think about (yesterday, no, maybe not even yesterday, but the day before that) the smell of the biscuits in the oven and the smell of the butter melting in the biscuits and the feel of the butter dripping down on your fingers off the sides of the biscuits as you look to see that there are going to be enough for you to eat another and another at least until you are full and before the biscuits are gone, or at least before they have cooled off.

Sometimes the decision is whether to put strawberry jam on the first one, or simply to savor the remembered taste of butter on the first biscuit, or maybe in the spring it may be fig preserves from the Mason jar in the refrigerator that Grandma Riddle put up and brought over when we had her over for Mary Carolyn's birthday in February: It was cold that day and we all were wondering if the rain was ever going to stop, but rather the rain than that fog that always settles in in January, that's when Mamma's and my birthday is, on the very same day.

So that later, years later, when I was cooking for my own family, I spent a good bit of time thinking about biscuits. Someone had given me a *Joy of Cooking Cookbook* and the recipe for biscuits in that book has got to be the best I've ever had and Southern women by tradition have eaten a lot of good biscuits through the years. We were in San Antonio when the kids were small and cooking biscuits was what I remember about those months in Texas, also how strange it all was, and how homesick I think I was and the park we'd go to to cool off, because it was hot in Texas, not that heat you get in Mississippi, but a different, alien kind of heat, dry and distancing.

Flight School 1964

Diapers hung out at midnight dry
by dawn at Fort Wolters.
Towels stiffen.
Window fans suck in dust from the highway,
rotor blades revolve.
Clothesline rope never sags in Texas.

Laundromat washers take heavy loads,
driers spin at Fort Rucker.
Fatigues wrinkle.
Dripping fog coats the porch of the duplex,
Hueys auto-rotate.
Barbed wire fences rust in Alabama.

Old Master

Some day I'll own an English Setter a beautiful dog,
hunting dog a dog who runs (I know a woman with Puma shoes)
Wild out in the country who chases rabbits and red squirrels
Sleeps on the rug in front of a fire digs holes under the porch
Comes when I call (she tosses her hair when she runs)
A dog named Sassy. I'll bring her into town close up
the backyard with chain link build a doghouse for cold nights,
lay blankets on the slab.

Maybe she will stay in the house
if I hang a light bulb,
Maybe she won't sleep in a hole
if it rains,
Maybe she won't be lying in frozen ice
in the morning.

Holly Springs

She's breaking out.
She studies his books--
black columns that drive
the Mercedes to Memphis,
sign the tab at the golf club,
pay the charge at Gap for Kids,
numbers that buy the piano,
the breakfront, his leather
chair, brass locks--late
at night he's passed out
on the Queen Anne
sofa with Johnny Red.

She's taking Tylenol
for her migraines, five
cups of coffee to make
it through dinner. She plays
bridge, talks to her mother
every day on the phone.
She's taking a night class
at the junior college,
memorizing his ledger
in the bedroom. She's
learned to use
the computer--financial
projections, spread-
sheets, WordPerfect 5.1.
She tallies the money
she's put aside padding
grocery checks, painting
sweatshirts, selling her *Old*
Master silver.
It's not enough.

Leaving Ole Miss

On the trip from Oxford to Gulfport,
a steel box with his tools rattles
on the back seat with our clothes.
This emptiness buried in sand
builds, intermingles
with the smell of crying.

The cotton boll gathers the first brush of wind.
Kudzu is climbing up telephone poles.
White men are glancing up from their coffee in diners
through wet glass. I am silent,
the car drifting down the blacktop roads.

Halfway, a familiar green field,
and fences closing off a meadow.

On the back seat back then your blankets were warm on our skin,
the cold windows fogged with our fast breathing.

When we reach our house, he unlocks the door;
our last daughter is waking up in her dorm.

Turn

I

The letter has come, halfway
down this stack of mail, more
than halfway down my mind.
Folded in a card from some museum
there--Persian tiles, *pantins,*
brushes, blue, green, orange.
The Bath. Who is the artist?

> *"If you will come with me tonight*
> *turn I'll take you to a mirror cave where blazing fires*
> *burn I'll pour into your mouth my honey*
> *words cover your dark body with a thousand candles"*

II

The red geranium made it through the frost, I lost
the red tips along the back fence. Who named the petunias this year?
"Summer Madness," "Purple Pirouette." Or I could put in
the same old ones, "Pride of Mobile" and "Double Sure."
My cottage seems colder this year, I don't know
if I want to spend another winter here, I don't know
if I can afford the cost.

Interlude

When it has rained for a long, long time,
the colors of flowers seem brilliant:
Perhaps it is because the air
is very, very pure,
perhaps it is because our eyes
are very, very hungry.

The Alligators

When the moon is full, and they are hungry, the alligators come down into the streets of San Fransisco. They are the color of fog. And so the thinkers cannot see them, except for an occasional glint from their half-closed eyes. One might think that their leathery backs could be seen in the night's light, but not so: the streets' being so full of discards. But when an alligator is lying close by, there is a tension one senses, an apprehension in one's loins, a growing knowledge, a giant, still force greater than man's comprehension.

Alligators in the South sleep among the marsh grasses of the bayou, hiding from the sun. But when the cars along the beach highway dwindle to just a few, they cross over and slither down the seawall to lie on the sand at the water's edge. Like office girls on lunch breaks, or college girls on spring breaks, they stretch near the Gulf with their cans of cold Coke or beer. Over the rock piles the water breaks. Their bellies are the color of sand.

He had waited for her for years, and when he saw her white belly, he knew he was to be her teacher; and when she saw his gray gnarled back, she knew she had ridden him many times in her mind, and was to ride him at last. She wanted to be cut on his scales, he wanted to drown in her milk. There was never a going back.

The Last Picture

What remained
long past the pungency of bay rum escaping from a raffia-bound
glass bottle,
or the insistent scent of summer oranges on the kitchen counter,
or the smell of butter melting on a biscuit,
long past these:

What stayed
years after deep, rumbling laughter during a long distance
phone call,
or tentative questions about airplane departures,
or weeping at the end of the visit,
years after these:

What was left
of the perfect weight of a right arm flung around a shoulder,
or the pressure of a hand on a finger,
or a breath on a eyelid,
What was left was:
The flash of red sun on black hair.

Sirens' Song

He: Summer loads down the days
with rains, clouds cut
the thick heat. Lightning flashes
your face over the baseball field.
When are you coming back?

Spiders clog up the screens with sticky webs,
dust coats the porch. Thunder pounds
your name over the telephone wires. How long
will it be till you come?

She: I'm painting a vase of flowers.

He: But the night air smells of long leaf pine and jasmine--

She: I'm writing a poem about passion.

He: The ground is soft with Spanish moss and clover--

She: I'm reading a book

He: My skin is salt.
My tongue is fire.

The Light-bringer

Richard Diebenkorn is dead.
The light man has gone home to light
who brought us light.
Shimmer of water floated over white linen,
shiver of color laid between park fences
blue, black, and red.

Richard Diebenkorn is not in Santa Monica among beach scavengers,
is home on radiant plains yellow, pink, and green--glazed
by hands oil soft,
fingers laser hard--
No eagle tearing at breast
No heart enchained
No high walls containing
who never contained light,
who shot light onto giant canvases,
who poured light on our thirsty eyes:
Lies down in light,
is bathed in light.

Scraps, Stones

The houses are filled with women embroidering
the names of children on strips of linen, sewing
invisible hems with steel needles bent by steel thimbles,
with red threads saved from flowered slipcovers,
black twist pulled from borders of prayer shawls:
Jacob, Isaac, Elizabeth, Sarah, Miriam.

The shops are empty of men.
They are incising names
of children on cobblestones
worn down by thirty-five tons
of shoes, washed clean
by weeping, rubbed with salt
and lamp oil: Joseph, Abraham,
Deborah, David, Saul.

Fallow

The trees marching along the walk are stripped
bare of ornament, make startling silhouettes
on an evening sky. Bundles of sticks lie bunched
and stacked.

In November I walked below a dome, the touching
points of shining sabers held aloft by soldiers swirling
with braid, gold in the chilling afternoon,
dancing in the faltering light.

Pull the mulch back from the thirsty roots.
The morning is stippled with spring rains.
Sun softens the air, the fallow time
is nearly done. A crocus spears the earth,
leaves are like down feathers on a thrush.
Over the path branches will rise to me again,
like palm trees bordering the entrance to a house,
like a canopy shading the doors of a church.

Horses

We have all been in poems
We did not know of, and they are true stories, and false.
Sometimes Guinevere is waiting lily-clad in rooms
At the castle sleeping alone under bear fur
Or sewing in windows or horses are charging the gates
Down below or burning the walls
Of the corridor or there are kings building
The oak table rounding out corners
Or carving lion's paws.
The smell of wood shavings spills
Over stone floors sometimes falling like lead
From pencils or banners are flying from two towers,
Lion and lily. We knot our threads. Hinges open and close.

The Lions

Caged inside prisons of uncourage,
felled by gunshot wounds,
they are the lions. They wait
for food, pace behind bars,
they stalk, encounter no harm.

What is there about their songs
that tames them, names them
"catcher and of caught"?
Do they turn from shade,
melt the locks, unchain
the gates to the corridor?

Other beasts fall into snow.
Lions march alone, their fires
blaze in their unclosed hands.
Do lions choose oranges,
touch with their hard fingers
the gold hair, their sunlight?

Waiting for the Lion

What we cannot see now
are bowls of boiled potatoes, we have driven
the sleigh of the White Witch. Bells sliver
through crystal air, spill not ambrosia, but magic
sweets wrapped in silver. The wolves
are hungry.

In our rooms
chalk lambs wait on end tables,
collecting dust, bowls of rind
scent the halls, the rocker is still.
Red words fade on bookshelves,
rice rattles in the salt shaker.
Grapes are shriveling.

Do not turn back,
going the way of all others, buried
in snow. Ferns are growing in both yards,
Christmas trees and lilies. Baskets filled
with oranges are unchained.
We light the lamps at the customary hours.
The table seats two.